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# CHAMBER-MUSIC : ITS PAST AND FUTURE

By CYRIL I. SCOTT

## I

**I**N the days of “good old father Haydn” as he is often sentimentally called—though why not equally “good old father Handel or Bach”; for, if anybody is entitled to the name of father, certainly the latter is, considering he had twenty-three children—in the days of “good old father Haydn,” I repeat, the writing of chamber-music was not the brain-taxing affair it at present is. If we judge from this old master’s idea of writing a trio, which was only trio-esque in the sense of having three instruments, but resembled more a duet as far as part-writing was concerned, and if we then compare it to the Trio of Ravel, we shall see what tremendous possibilities were latent in that simple form, and what great strides music has made within the last hundred years or so. Indeed, it seems that in those days Haydn considered he had adequately done his duty by that particular form when he contrived that his ’cello should proceed in unison with, and so reinforce, his pianoforte bass, whereas nowadays this very indolent simplicity certainly does not satisfy our moderns, who are not content to write a trio by name but must needs also write a trio by nature.

But to the subject of trios we shall return anon, for we shall be landed in difficulties if we do not, at the outset of our enterprise, make some clear definition as to what *has* been meant, *is* meant and *may* be meant in the future by the term chamber-music. It is in fact evident that the designation is not a very happy one, being used far too loosely and in a most arbitrary manner. Nor can we fail to see that much which really is chamber-music is not so termed: for what could be more suited to a room and less suited to a hall than a violin solo, yet how often do we hear, for instance, the Chaconne of Bach, or some unaccompanied piece for ’cello, in a big hall instead of in its proper place? Thus one would almost like to raise a plea for keeping types of music (like children) in their proper places—and demand that what really is chamber-music be termed and treated as such without any attempt to stretch it beyond its inherent capacities. In my country (England), for instance, a singer will

appear in the middle of an orchestral concert and sing several songs with pianoforte accompaniment, the anti-climax—after the performance of large orchestral works—being deplorable. But the fact is that for some perverse and unaccountable reason, voice and pianoforte in conjunction do not fall into the category of chamber-music; the result being that such a conjunction finds performance anywhere from the small dimensions of a duchess' boudoir to the colossal and ill-sounding dimensions of the Albert Hall. And yet if this inartistic procedure obtains in connection with singers, it also obtains with a violinist or 'cellist—who likewise in the middle of a large orchestral concert (where usually he has played a concerto) comes forward with an accompanist and unblushingly plays a *morceau de salon* to the tinkling of a pianoforte. This is in fact a convention, and one which has developed largely from mercenary reasons—i.e., the soloist has been engaged, and therefore the audience must have its money's worth, however inartistic and unesthetic that money's worth may be.

Now there is no gainsaying that a solo-violin or solo-'cello sounds in itself very thin in a large hall, but when it immediately follows upon the enormous volume of sound produced by a large orchestra, the effect is highly detrimental to the very greatest and most accomplished artists. 'Cello-solos and violin-solos—in fact all solos excepting those which never take place in serious concerts (I allude to trombone, cornet or bass-tuba solos)—belong to the domain of chamber-music and only to that, and the sooner this is realized the more artistic and esthetic will our concerts become. I grant that, as regards the voice, there does exist a certain difference, in that the vocal cords of a singer like Madame Clara Butt (who possesses what is termed "a magnificent organ") are capable of producing more actual noise, or I ought more politely to say, a greater volume of sound, than the catgut cords of a violin or 'cello. But strictly speaking (for Madame Butt is an exception), all songs *without orchestral accompaniment* are exclusively chamber-music, and even more so than compositions which demand a greater number of instruments, and which being termed such, are never introduced into orchestral concerts. Nay, who has heard of, let us say, a pianoforte-quintet or a string-sextet being introduced between two choral works or two symphonies by way of an interlude?

I shall, of course, be saying the obvious when I remark that six instruments produce more sound than one, just as two pigs under a gate (to quote the old riddle) produce more squeals than one; yet why, as already inferred, music which is more of the chamber order is not regarded as such, while music which is less so is hardly termed chamber-music at all, is a question I leave open for those "learned

idlers" who are fond of engaging in controversy. However, if this article succeeds in calling attention to the necessity and esthetic value of proper categorization, it will not have been written altogether in vain.

## II

I was about to state that at one time nearly all music was chamber-music, but on prompt reflection—for certainly the music which brought down the Walls of Jericho was not chamber-music—I must amend the statement and be content to point out that a large percentage of what we now have as symphonic music was performed in *rooms* of varying sizes, and seldom in a hall bigger than one we should regard as suitable for our present-day chamber concerts. I am reminded of this, in fact, by certain pictures portraying a musical evening in the time of Frederick the Great, in which half of the room is taken up by the musicians (and the chandeliers) and less than half by the courtiers. As to the instruments, I see a certain number of strings, wood-wind and a harpsichord, and perhaps a harp—which after all, is a very tidy little orchestra. But even this melodious picture portrays comparatively modern times, and if we go back further to the days of Shakespeare, it becomes almost as strangely out of place to imagine people attending a set concert as to imagine them attending a motor race. Indeed, leaving purely instrumental music aside, we can only consider *madrigals*, *rounds* and glee-singing as chamber-music in one sense, even though these did often take place in the more poetical atmosphere of a garden, or perhaps a village green, or in the snow-clad street outside "my lady's window." Yes, well might we say, in those days music was small and choice, whereas nowadays, music is largely the opposite; we have gone to the other extreme, and but a few years ago the acme of a musical treat (to some people which I personally should be impolite enough to consider *unmusical*) was to hear Handel's "Messiah" with a chorus of three thousand, if not more, and an orchestra, or let us rather say a *band*, of two hundred and fifty performers. Really it almost suggests Rabelais in its enormity—or was it a forerunner of "Big Bertha," the gun that shot seventy-two (or was it one hundred and twenty?) miles?

All the same, in considering the probabilities and possibilities of our subject, it is fairly obvious that in this connection, at any rate, the reaction has already set in, and one thing strikes us very forcibly: in chamber-music we are not increasing our number of instruments, but rather *utilizing their fullest capacities instead*. Indeed, if you will have it phrased in a homely way, we are economizing in players

but making them work the harder. . . . And yet, let it not be thought we moderns are the first to have done this; for I remember hearing an anecdote about Beethoven, who, after writing a certain passage and confronting the players with it, discovered they rebelled and declared the passage impossible of execution:—whereupon they were simply told to go home and practise it, which they *did*, with the desired result.

At this juncture we may review the past and certain of its forms—those forms of chamber-music which, although penned by great masters, have, for reasons which this article may attempt to explain, not stood the so-called test of time, but have been banished to that semi-oblivion which constitutes them as of mere historical interest and nothing more. And I allude to such forms as trios for strings only; that simplest of all forms which come under the arbitrary heading of chamber-music. Now, I am inclined to think there are two reasons why certain types of music become so soon antiquated, the first and obvious that in our modern days of polyphony, they sound too thin and are too easily understandable, like a Wordsworth poem about a toy boat and a beggar boy. But if that is the first reason, there is yet a subtler and more psychological one which has every bit as much, if not more, to do with the matter. I allude to the fact of the novelty having worn off—novelty being a far more important sustainer of interest than people are apt to suppose. As I have pointed out in my book called the *Philosophy of Modernism*<sup>1</sup>, however much we may revere John Keats, and however often the first line of *Endymion* may have been on our grandfather's lips, the fact remains that “a thing of beauty is” not always “a joy forever.” To apply the adjusted adage to the case in point, the beauty of thin music may fade as a once beautiful photograph may fade, and for that matter become thinner and more bilious-looking until there is nothing left. But the question arises, is *all* “thin” music doomed to oblivion, both of the past and the present? The answer leads one to reflect, and is instructive. It brings, in fact, to our notice that if the “thin” music is sufficiently ancient, it pleases us exceedingly. And why? Because the very quaintness of its harmonies and other devices falls upon our ears as *novel* once again. How delightful are some very old madrigals, and how delightful again some old folk-songs with their original accompaniments—and not the ones superadded by a later composer (Beethoven, for instance, who set accompaniments suited to his own day

<sup>1</sup>Kegan Paul.

to many of these old airs). And yet, was not Beethoven a greater master of music than these old madrigal composers? This admitted, why have his particular accompaniments failed to reach a satisfying immortality, and still more, why have his *string-trios* failed to do so? Because, as we pointed out, some things of beauty are not always joys forever.

There enters into this whole question what we may term the element of *musical suitability*, or, perhaps better said, *poetical suitability*. To illustrate my point, I may mention, that one day long ago when I attended a performance of one of Shakespeare's plays in the theatre at Frankfort-on-the-Main, at a certain juncture of the play, there struck up the strains of a few mandolins and violas, a piece of incidental music so poetically *suitable* and so novel in sound, that both the composer with whom I was at the time and I were fascinated and charmed. Here was a little "fantasia" of "chamber-music" or garden music (yes, why not garden music?) which appealed to us as the very essence of appropriateness, not only in connection with the play we were witnessing, but in connection with the actual musical content to which those few violas and mandolins gave expression. And yet, charming though this was, who could conceive of a lengthy and pretentious chamber work composed in sonata form, and containing four movements, and lasting half an hour, written if you please, for three mandolins and two violas? (I hear a voice within me saying, Beware! one of your best friends may be doing this very thing ere long—you never can tell. True, but nevertheless I will not retract my question.)

It is just this lack of poetical appropriateness which I feel to be responsible for the bad wearing qualities of the string-trio of the Beethovenian and pre-Beethovenian epoch. To be appealing nowadays, it is not harmonically subtle enough, not poetically picturesque enough, not melodically quaint enough. I am, of course, aware that this statement may shock certain chamber-music enthusiasts. This I cannot help; besides, the capacity to be shocked is not a quality to be encouraged, being rather a decadent quality than otherwise. After all, someone must do this dirty work of thinking and saying for the first time (aye, is it for the first time?) what hundreds of people are dying to think and say, if the phrase be not too paradoxical. When will people have the initiative, for instance, to put their feet down and say: "We heartily dislike the sound produced by violin unaccompanied?" The argument is that if such a genius as Bach thought it beautiful, that is good enough for "us." But wait a minute: would not Bach be soulfully distressed if he heard his chords arpeggioed in that highly disconcerting manner

which the modern violin bow forces its handlers to adopt? For I wonder how many people—indeed, how many violin virtuosos—are aware that the old bow was made in such a way (curved and with a possibility of slackening the hairs) that the chords did not need to be broken? Alas, change is not always progress, and when we talk of “all modern conveniences,” we forget to include several modern inconveniences.

But we have digressed for a moment during our little *causerie*. To return and add just a few words more anent the string-trio, the question is, will there come a day when we shall listen to those old trios with a renewed pleasure? And why not—since may not the day come when they, too, will sound so old as to sound new again? After all, it seems to be with music as it is with pictures; for I hear that in The London National Gallery, certain pictures are put away in the cellars for a time and then resuscitated. Thus, what is not appreciated in one age is appreciated in another; for the prerequisite to the awakening of appreciation towards a work is, that it must be very new—or very old. I know of a great painter, for instance, who loves Cimabue but heartily dislikes Raphael: the latter, forsooth, is not quaint enough!

### III

I alluded erewhile to the Haydn type of pianoforte-trio as a form of duet, even though it entailed three instruments; a fact which every observant student must have noticed for himself. He will equally have noticed that Beethoven considerably improved on this, as did also his successor Franz Schubert. But was Haydn merely careless in his treatment of this form or did he know no better? It is hard to say; but *apropos* of carelessness, there is an anecdote which runs that Beethoven, who was Haydn's pupil, chided the latter with some asperity for having left a mistake in his (Beethoven's) harmony exercise. Did the latter also chide *him* for not writing true trios? History does not relate. I think, however, a good many modern musicians chide him by not playing his works; preferring the trio by nature and not only by name. And yet one wonders why these ineffective trios exist, when his quartets were up to his prevailing standard of excellence; so “all that they should be,” indeed, that they leave us nothing to say on the matter. Nor would it profit us materially in connection with this *causerie* to scrutinize his followers along this line, the masterpieces of Beethoven and Schubert; all one might say of the latter in the shape of friendly criticism is that he failed to recognize at times that brevity which “is the soul of wit.” As to the quartets of the still later composer

Robert Schumann, it is curious to note that although he was a poor hand at writing intrinsically orchestral music, his chamber-works were singularly effective, and full of a dulcet charm. Strangely so, because as a rule the composer who has little sense for orchestral color, fails to produce the most effective chamber-music, as may be seen by a close and critical scrutiny of the works of Brahms. That Brahms wrote beautiful and meritful music as such, few will deny, but that he always contrived to produce beautiful sounds is another matter. It is all too obvious that at times he wrote what has been not ill-described as *paper-music*—that is, music which when read by our mental ear looks beautiful of content, but when it comes to be played sounds hideous. Indeed, could there exist a more ill-sounding work than the last movement of the Sonata for 'cello and piano in E minor? Not altogether without reason have I heard this movement irreverently described as "cats' music" on account of the grunting and scratching produced by the quick, but ineffective writing for the 'cello in a totally unsuitable register. Read this work on paper, however, and musically it will be enjoyable. But, after all, as music is intended for performance and not for mere perusal, we must regard Brahms as being lacking in a very essential part of technique, or in a quality which is highly valuable to the tone-poet. It is true, I have picked out the worst example to be found among his many works; nevertheless, there is no denying that even when writing solely for the piano, Brahms indulged in thick bass-chords which sound far from esthetic. I have also heard it said by string-players engaged in rendering his quartets, quintets, etc., that it is only with the greatest difficulty they can make these works "come off." And I think the secret of his deficiency lay in the fact that his imagination was of that order which rendered him inadequately able to picture reality—he thought in music but not in pure sounds. It is, in fact, curious that one or two Germans have manifested this same deficiency, whereas to my knowledge *never* has a Frenchman. Bizet was an exquisite instrumentalist, or, shall I say, sound-colourist; the works of Ambroise Thomas and Gounod invariably "come off," such as they are; and Berlioz and César Franck, whether strictly French or not, may be added to the list, while the colour-talents of Chausson and Debussy are too well known for mention. The Russians and the immortal Pole, Chopin, had this same capacity, for even though the latter confined himself almost exclusively to piano writing, he used that instrument in the most well-sounding manner imaginable, and one previously unknown. To this list we may add Dvořák and Smetana, who also undoubtedly possessed a tone-colour sense in varying degrees.

We have now mentioned a fair number of deceased celebrities who have been drawn to the chamber-music form, but the list were not entirely complete without Felix Mendelssohn, for I, as probably many others, had almost forgotten his several works of this order. Still, in the days of my youth they were occasionally performed at the Frankfort Conservatoire concerts; those terrifying ordeals modestly termed "*Übungs-Abende*," which means Exercise Evenings, Practice-Evenings, or however one would most euphoniously translate it. Yes, terrifying ordeals, I repeat; for woe unto the student who really did *practise* on such an evening, and breaking down had to start again. Never has the "complete and turned out goods" in the shape of the fully equipped musician suffered from such nervousness, I warrant, as he or she did at those old Practice-Evenings. And what an audience for an as yet unripe executant to have to play before; comprising such celebrities as Madam Schumann, Hugo Becker, Hugo Heermann, Professor Stockhausen, and on one occasion even Anton Rubinstein.

But I have wandered again far afield, and now, after all this prelude to a few remarks on Mendelssohn as a chamber-music writer, there is very little to be said. I remember, however, that our professors, when they wished to favour me with a special confidence on the subject, used to allude to his mannerisms, especially certain writing of piano-passages of an arpeggio type, from which he was unable to free himself. Nevertheless, the Mendelssohn chamber-works were not deficient in *sounding* propensities, although, in these works, he never seems to have invented a novel effect, as he did in orchestral writing (though with the dust of years, so to speak, even his orchestral effects do not strike us as such nowadays). As to why one hears so little of Mendelssohn's chamber-music at the present time—well, the secret may lie in the ephemeral results of facility. Mendelssohn was a most facile writer. I have heard it said somewhere that he could get a whole work into his head before he wrote a single note down, and that, while he was actually engaged in writing it down, he could carry on a conversation. I admit, this story sounds a little "steep" and hardly credible, but, as there are Indian pundits or mental gymnasts who can actually think of twenty-eight different things at once, perhaps Mendelssohn had also been a bit of a pundit in a previous incarnation! Be that as it may, at any rate the result of such facility is that nowadays one hears (in my country), save for the "Elijah" and the ever-charming and delightful violin-concerto, very little of Mendelssohn, and personally I have not heard a single chamber-music work of his since those old days in the Conservatoire.

## IV

One is apt to imagine that the Russians, including Tchaikovsky, were the first to introduce "effects in chamber-music," but let us beware of this notion, since it may be entirely false. The truth is, as I already hinted, that an "effect" is only perceptible (with few exceptions) in the periods in which it is written. When the dust of years has dimmed its varnish, so to speak, it ceases to appeal to the listener as an effect at all; in other words, it has become embodied in the musical content. One hears, for instance, a great deal about the "effects" of the moderns and hyper-moderns, and when a critically minded person is itching to pick holes in works, as he invariably is (strange, how some people like to perform the office of worms), then he talks of So and so's incorrigible fondness for "effects," forgetting that every novel-sounding tone-colour cannot be anything else. It is in fact just this capacity to create new sound combinations in addition to new matter, which indicates the difference between the very greatest musical composers and the less great: the very great invents in all directions, the less great does *not*. It is true that a man may have a talent for sound-combinations alone, without the adjunct of true musical inspiration, and I am inclined to think that Berlioz furnishes us with an illustration of this sort, though one feels about his music at times, as if he had *deliberately* set about to think out new effects, irrespective of whether they were beautiful or not. Thus he gives us the impression of being too much of an experimentalist. However, let us be grateful to him. We owe him much; we indirectly owe to him some of the Wagnerian sublimities. And evidently Wagner *in his day* must have sounded full of effects, though nobody talks of his effect-production nowadays, for the reason already pointed out.

In a word then, we must go warily when we allude to the tone-colour of the modern and comparatively modern in contradistinction to that of the ancients. How can we be certain that the Mozart and Haydn quartets did not appeal to their listeners as equally novel in actual tone-colour as in musical content? Nay, who indeed shall say, since we can now only regard them with ears incapable of accurate retrospect?—"perverted ears," the old fogies would say, though as to that there are slight differences of opinion. We may safely state this much, however, that whereas each musical epoch has had its special characteristics—polyphony, melody, structure and so on—the characteristic of the present age is tone-colour, what has been termed by Frenchmen the *musique de sonorité*. Perhaps we may also say that as far as chamber-music goes, the Russians were

the first to embark on this colouristic adventure. Is there not a whole scherzo written in harmonics, by Borodin? And as to the Trios by Arensky and Tchaikovsky, are they not richer in sound than anything invented before them? I think the answer is certainly in the affirmative. These indeed were epoch-making trios, after which came an interval, until the record was again broken (to use a sporting term *à la* Percy Grainger) by that highly inventive Frenchman, Maurice Ravel.

With the mention of this remarkable man, we come to the chamber-music of the present day. Firstly, I do not hesitate to say that the Ravel Trio is a most astoundingly novel work of art in more directions than one—nay, in all directions. No more does he subscribe to the old trio form, but presents us respectively with a nameless *prelude*, a *pantoun*, a *passacaglia* and then a *finale*. Thus, to begin with, the form is novel; in addition, the harmony and polyphony are novel, while most novel of all is the sound-colouring: with the result that this work is very difficult; I recently heard an admirable performance of it in London by Miss May and Beatrice Harrison and Mr. Hamilton Harty. That Ravel must have a very intimate knowledge of stringed instruments is obvious, for it would almost seem as if he had drained them of all their possibilities.

If Ravel has proved himself a master of effects in this Trio, his string-quartet is equally rich in novel colour. It goes even Debussy one better in this direction. Indeed, I unhesitatingly say that the Ravel quartet *sounds* more remarkable than any hitherto penned, with the Debussy quartet not far behind in the running. And yet both these Frenchmen showed themselves latterly not content with the usual chamber-music combinations, and before his death, Debussy had conceived a scheme to write chamber-works of an entirely new nature. We have also Ravel's *Septet* for strings, wind, and harp, a most effective work.

Thus, finally, we come to what may be the future of chamber-music, and its latent possibilities for divers kinds of combinations. How charming, for instance, would a piece for flute, viola and harp be, or oboe, viola and harp. The harp, in fact, is not used enough in chamber-music, partly because of its incapacity for quick modulation, and, though this has now been overcome by the introduction of the chromatic harp, partly because a certain conservatism prevents people from using the chromatic harp, their excuse being that its tone is not as rich as that of the diatonic harp. Still, a very sonorous tone is not so necessary for chamber purposes, and I, for one, shall gladly see the day when other composers besides Debussy employ

this valuable new instrument. The clarionet is another instrument far too little used in chamber-music, even though Brahms tried to set the fashion. Our present-day music is highly suited to its employment, especially if harp be used instead of piano. Nor must we forget the horn, which likewise Brahms employed without finding many followers, in spite of all the great possibilities that offer themselves.

I am aware, of course, that there are certain practical reasons why it will be difficult to "popularize" unusual combinations, although there be quartet-parties who make a habit of practising together year in and year out; as soon as a great variety of instruments are required, difficulties immediately arise of a purely practical kind. An oboist or harpist considers himself an orchestral player, and at any rate in this country (England) is seldom available for any other purpose. Thus, when a chamber-work of an unsterotyped order is produced, it is invariably inadequately rehearsed. Therefore, what we shall require in the future, are wind players who make a point of being chamber-music performers before everything else; we need, in fact, more players after the type of Louis Fleury (flute), who never plays in orchestras at all. And I believe it must come to that eventually with the drift that chamber-music is taking in the hand of the moderns. For instance, I am glad to see that in America there is the New York Chamber Music Society embodying a number of wind instruments, though, as far as I know, no harp is added. I hope that there will be more such societies as time goes on to fulfill one of the demands of the coming age, for, although I do not contend that the string-quartet is "played out," and likely to be laid aside in the future, from a purely phonetic point of view it is by no means the most perfect combination. Looking at it with the most critical scrutiny, the volume of sound produced by the 'cello is "out of proportion" to that produced by the violin, with the result that unless very carefully manipulated it invariably comes too much to the fore. I have also noticed that when string-quartet players become very enthusiastic and passionate and "lay in for all they are worth," the result is apt to cease to be unadulterated music, and becomes more than tainted with an admixture of sheer noise. There is likely to be a scratching and a grunting of vehemently chastised strings which is anything but pleasant to the ear, and hence exceedingly disconcerting to all, except to the players themselves, who seem to be thoroughly enjoying the effects of their exertions. I am also constrained to add, that on these occasions the tonality becomes very dubious; which does not add to the beauty of the general effect. Some may regard what I here say as hypercriticism, especially

string-players themselves, but my honesty compels me to say it nevertheless.

As to using the voice in, or with, chamber-music, we have some excellent examples from the pen of Dr. Vaughan Williams, string-quartet and voice being, indeed, a charming combination. Also, such a device as voice and flute alone, has most poetical possibilities, if the music written be consistent, that is to say, sufficiently atmospheric. In fine, we are confronted with a whole new field of effects wholly or only very partially explored as yet, and well may we cry: "Composers, be daring, go in and win, explore the new regions; manifest the divine discontent which, though revering the old, ever seeks the new!"